United Nations A/53/302

General Assembly

Distr.: General
27 August 1998

Original: English

Fifty-third session
Item 116 of the provisional agenda*
Programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999

Office accommodation at the Palais Wilson

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

It will be recalled that following consideration of the reports of the Secretary-General (A/C.5/52/19 and Add.1 and Add.1/Corr.1), as well as the related report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (A/52/7/Add.4), the General Assembly, in its decision 52/465 of 25 March 1998, approved the proposal of the Secretary-General to accept the offer of the Swiss authorities to place the office accommodation at the Palais Wilson in Geneva at the disposal of the United Nations. At the same time, the General Assembly decided, *inter alia*, to request that a cost-benefit analysis be submitted at the next part of its resumed fifty-second session on the use of the existing conference facilities available at the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

The present report attempts to provide the information and clarification requested by the General Assembly on the issue.

1. In his reports on office accommodations at the Palais Wilson, the Secretary-General indicated that there was a need for three conference rooms at the Palais: one currently existing with a capacity to accommodate 100 to 120 delegates; one smaller room, which would seat 60 to 80 delegates, involving neither construction nor structural changes but needing to be equipped with furniture and interpretation features; and a third room envisaged with a seating capacity for some 120 delegates, requiring structural changes and construction, utilizing funds made available by the Government of Switzerland (A/C.5/52/19, para. 7, and A/C.5/52/19/Add.1, paras. 10 to 13).

2. A number of questions were raised regarding the need for the third room and, as a corollary, the impact that the move of a number of human rights meetings would have on the occupancy of conference rooms at the Palais des Nations. The present report addresses these two issues.

* A/53/150

98-25671 (E) 220998

Need for three conference rooms at the Palais Wilson

3. Based on the calendar of meetings for 1997 and 1998, as well as the number and type of meetings scheduled for 1999, which at this juncture is expected to increase rather than decrease, in paragraphs 11 to 13 of his report (A/C.5/52/19/Add.1), the Secretary-General explained that the three conference rooms at the Palais Wilson were needed to accommodate all human rights meetings, except those of the Commission on Human Rights and the Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, which would continue to be held at the Palais des Nations.

4. The programme of meetings conducted by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights throughout the year includes a high concentration of medium and small sized meetings involving, at times, intensive input from the human rights substantive and administrative sectors. The 1998 list of middle and small size meetings is in the order of some 120, of a duration varying from one to two days to three weeks; these are made up of meetings of treaty bodies, open-ended working groups of a standard setting nature, meetings of boards of trustees, working groups, special rapporteurs, etc. These meetings are expected to occupy the Palais Wilson facilities on a full-time basis.

5. While participation and input at these meetings could be provided on an ongoing basis at the Palais Wilson by the staff concerned, without greatly impeding the regular work schedule, the same cannot be said if these meetings were to continue to be held at the Palais des Nations, since this would virtually paralyse the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, as it would entail staff spending most of their time at the Palais des Nations waiting to be called to these meetings, or alternatively, delaying these meetings whilst the required staff shuttles back and forth between the Palais Wilson and the Palais des Nations. It would therefore be both inefficient and a waste of the resources of the Office of the High Commissioner to have these meetings take place outside the Palais Wilson. Further, it would be detrimental to the service provided to Member States, since service would be that much slower and less productive.

6. For the larger, more formal events to be held at the Palais des Nations, such as the annual sessions of the Commission on Human Rights and the Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities and the entire range of satellite meetings that take place in connection with these sessions, a nucleus of staff would be posted in temporary offices at the Palais des Nations for the duration of these sessions.

Impact on occupancy of conference rooms at the Palais des Nations

7. The total number of meetings at the Palais des Nations increased from 5,828 meetings in 1988 to 6,831 meetings in 1992 and to 7,859 meetings in 1997, representing an overall increase of some 35 per cent between 1988 and 1997, or an increase of 225 meetings per year (meetings are measured in 3-hour units). From 1992 to 1997 the related increase has been 15 per cent or some 200 meetings per year.

8. If particular focus is placed on the 19 meeting rooms of the size needed to accommodate the human rights meetings scheduled to be held at the Palais Wilson, the data is as follows: 4,137 meetings were held in such rooms in 1992, while 4,857 meetings took place in 1997, an increase of some 17 per cent or an average increase of some 150 meetings per year. Projections for 1998 of the number of meetings indicates that there will be an increase in the number of meetings of the magnitude experienced in the preceding 5-year period. Should the increase in the number of meetings continue to follow this trend, it is estimated that four years hence, some 750 additional meetings would need to be serviced at the United Nations Office at Geneva in rooms similar in size to those currently used for human rights meetings, excluding those of the Commission and Subcommission. These additional requirements would, however, be addressed by the release of meeting rooms used by human rights bodies, if, in taking into consideration the information already provided in paragraph 12 of the report of the Secretary-General (A/C.5/52/19/Add.1), the Palais Wilson accommodates an estimated 680 human rights meetings per year.

9. Additionally, requests for meeting rooms at the Palais des Nations are more acute during the middle of the year (May to August), when there is no spare capacity at present to accommodate all such requests. Consequently, the move of human rights meetings to the conference rooms at the Palais Wilson would not only release conference room space for the anticipated increase in the number of overall meetings, but allow flexibility in the consideration of requests for meeting rooms which heretofore could not be met during the peak period and thus required rescheduling. Based on their 1998 meeting schedule, it is estimated that some 135 meetings could be accommodated during that yearly peak period.

10. The flexibility to accommodate additional meetings in meeting rooms released by human rights bodies is particularly significant as a number of the requests which could not previously be entertained had related to back-to-back or extended meetings where experts, delegates or staff members in attendance from duty stations away from Geneva had to depart and return at a later time when meeting rooms became available, thereby resulting in additional travel costs.

Conclusion

11. Based on the foregoing, and recalling that the existing two conference rooms at the Palais Wilson would not require construction activity, the General Assembly may wish to note the plans of the Secretary-General to proceed with completion of the construction of the third conference room at the Palais Wilson utilizing funds made available by the Government of Switzerland.

United Nations A/53/303

General Assembly

Distr.: General
27 August 1998

Original: English

Fifty-third session
Item 72 (c) of the provisional agenda*

General and complete disarmament: measures to uphold the authority of the 1925 Geneva Protocol

Note by the Secretary-General

1. At its fifty-first session, the General Assembly adopted resolution 51/45 P of 10 December 1996, entitled "Measures to uphold the authority of the 1925 Geneva Protocol", operative paragraphs 1 to 3 of which read as follows:

> "*The General Assembly*,
>
> "...
>
> "1. *Renews* its previous call to all States to observe strictly the principles and objectives of the Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare, signed at Geneva on 17 June 1925,[1] and reaffirms the vital necessity of upholding its provisions;
>
> "2. *Calls upon* those States that continue to maintain reservations to the 1925 Geneva Protocol to withdraw those reservations;
>
> "3. *Requests* the Secretary-General to submit to the General Assembly at its fifty-third session a report on the implementation of the present resolution."

2. Since the adoption of that resolution, no additional withdrawal of reservations by States parties has been reported by the Depositary of the 1925 Geneva Protocol. Should the Secretary-General receive notice of any withdrawals of reservations to the Protocol, Member States shall be duly informed.

---

* A/53/150

[1] League of Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. XCIV (1929), No. 2138.

98-25955 (E) 240998

United Nations A/53/304

General Assembly

Distr.: General
26 August 1998

Original: English

Fifty-third session
Item 113 (b) of the provisional agenda*
Human rights questions: human rights questions, including alternative approaches for improving the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms

Question of enforced or involuntary disappearances

Report of the Secretary-General

1. At its fifty-first session, the General Assembly adopted resolution 51/94 of 12 December 1996 entitled "Question of enforced or involuntary disappearances", in which it reaffirmed that any act of enforced disappearance is an offence to human dignity and a grave and flagrant violation of the human rights and fundamental freedoms proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and developed in other international instruments in this field, as well as a violation of the rules of international law. The General Assembly also reiterated its invitation to all Governments to take appropriate legislative or other steps to prevent and suppress the practice of enforced disappearances, in keeping with the Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, and to take action to that end at the national and regional levels and in cooperation with the United Nations. It also encouraged States to provide concrete information on measures taken to give effect to the Declaration, as well as obstacles encountered, and requested all States to consider the possibility of disseminating the text of the Declaration in their respective national languages and to facilitate its dissemination in the national and local languages. In conclusion, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to keep it informed of the steps he takes to secure the widespread dissemination and promotion of the Declaration and to submit to it at its fifty-third session a report on the steps taken to implement the resolution.

2. In conformity with resolution 51/94, the Department of Public Information has undertaken several activities, including distribution of the full text of the Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, published by the former Centre for Human Rights (see Fact Sheet No. 6 (Rev. 2)). The Department of Public Information booklet of the text of the Declaration continues to be distributed through United Nations information centres, to United Nations peacekeeping offices and the specialized agencies of the United Nations. The text of the Declaration is also available on the United Nations

* A/53/150

98-25643 (E) 170998

website on the Internet, under the section on General Assembly resolutions. In addition, the Department's Public Liaison Service at Headquarters makes the Declaration available to the general public and educational institutes upon request.

3. In the field, the Department's network of information centres and services and United Nations offices have copies of publications containing the Declaration in their reference libraries for use by interested students, researchers and academicians. They also distribute copies to media and non-governmental organizations and at special events such as the annual celebration of Human Rights Day and activities to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

4. In 1997 and 1998, the Department of Public Information prepared background press releases and organized press conferences for members of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances at the end of its annual sessions at Headquarters. During the current biennium, the Department will produce special media information and a backgrounder on the question of enforced disappearances. Every opportunity will be used to promote the elements of the Declaration in briefings and events dealing with the United Nations and human rights at Headquarters, Geneva and throughout the network of United Nations information centres and services.

5. The field offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights have also actively distributed the Declaration to local non-governmental organizations and other interested parties. The Declaration is also included as part of the background for training projects on the administration of justice being developed in the framework of the human rights' advisory services, technical assistance and information programme.

6. The Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances has been entrusted by the Commission on Human Rights with the task of monitoring States' compliance with their obligations deriving from the Declaration. The Working Group has stressed that States are under an obligation to take effective measures to prevent and terminate acts of enforced disappearance, in particular by making them continuing offences under domestic criminal law and by establishing civil liability. It has also recalled that the Declaration refers to the right to prompt and effective judicial remedy, as well as unhampered access by national authorities to all places of detention, the right of habeas corpus, the maintenance of centralized registers of persons deprived of their liberty, the duty to investigate fully all alleged cases of disappearances, the duty to try alleged perpetrators of disappearances before ordinary courts, the exemption of the criminal offence of acts of enforced disappearance from statutes of limitations, special amnesty laws and similar measures leading to impunity. The Working Group periodically reminds Governments of these obligations and draws the attention of non-governmental organizations to the general and specific aspects of the Declaration.

7. The Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances of the Commission on Human Rights also adopts in its reports general comments on those provisions of the Declaration that might need further explanation and continues to issue country-specific observations regarding the implementation of the Declaration.

8. It should be noted that, since its establishment in 1980, the Working Group has transmitted a total of 47,964 cases to 76 Governments. There are now 45,163 cases under active consideration by the Working Group, some involving individuals who have been missing for more than 20 years. The Group has clarified 2,801 cases since its inception. During 1997, the Working Group received some 1,247 new cases of disappearance in 26 countries and clarified 122 cases.

9. During its fifty-fourth session, held at Headquarters from 13 to 17 July 1998, the Working Group clarified 50 cases as a result of replies and communications with Governments, sources and families. The Working Group reviewed 98 new cases and transmitted reports on them to various Governments. Another 108 cases were transmitted during 1998 as urgent actions, as soon as the Working Group received the correspondents' complaints.

10. The Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances was the first thematic mechanism established by the Commission on Human Rights charged with the task of investigating gross violations of human rights in all countries of the world and publicly reporting on their findings. It has played a pioneering role as a channel of communication between victims, families, non-governmental organizations and Governments, as well as in the promotion and the interpretation of the Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. It continues to call upon all Governments to investigate and clarify past cases of enforced or involuntary disappearances, to bring the perpetrators to justice, to exhume mortal remains and to pay adequate compensation to the victims and their families, taking effective measures to prevent enforced disappearances even in emergency situations.